Irina Tokmakova

ROSTIK AND KESHA

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translated from the Russian
by Raissa Bobrova

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Chapter One

KESHA COMES

At last Rostik had been left alone.

He had stopped coughing and was now sitting on the porch of the little house called the isolation ward. Elizaveta Elizarovna the doctor had retired to her office, after pronouncing, "No, it's not pertussis." In medical language "pertussis" meant whooping-cough.

Rostik was very happy that he did not have the whooping-cough after all. That was a good thing!

"That's a very good thing," confirmed the merry birch-tree which grew beside the porch. At any rate Rostik thought it said this.

The hazel bush nodded silently, but not because it wanted to join the conversation, but because at that very moment a dog parted its boughs and climbed through. He stopped before Rostik breathing noisily, its tongue lolling.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Rostik," said Rostik.

The dog drew nearer cautiously and sniffed at his knee.

"And I'm Kesha," he said. "I am not afraid of you, am I?"

"No," said Rostik. "Why should you be?"

The dog wagged its curled-up tail.

"You don't throw stones at dogs, do you?"

"Oh no!"

"Not sticks either?"

"No, I don't throw sticks either."

Kesha wagged his curled tail again.

"Help me then," he said.

"All right," said Kesha. "How?"

"You must speak to Gleb."

"Who is Gleb?"

"He is the finest person on earth. He brought me home yesterday and said I'd always live with him. And he named me Kesha. It's a good name, isn't it?"

"Yes. And how did they call you before?"

"Various things," Kesha said sadly. "Tuzik first. And then Dogsallovertheplace."

"It can't be. There is no such name."

"That's what I thought too."

"And why did you leave Gleb?"

"Leave him? I did not leave him. They kicked me out."

"Who, Gleb?"

"No, of course not Gleb. His grandfather. He threw a stone at me, then a stick, and then ... a boot."

"What for?"

"He said... Now what did he call it? I know it's a bad word. He said 'worms'."

"Too bad," Rostik said in dismay. "And what are you going to do now?"

"That's why I'm asking you to help me."

"What d'you want me to do?"

"I don't know..." Kesha was silent for a while, his head hanging low. Then he raised it and looked at Rostik. "Come with me. I'll stay out of sight and you'll bring Gleb. He is waiting for me, but the grandfather does not even let me near the gate. Come on."

"I can't," Rostik said apologetically.

"Why?"

"I don't live on my own, you know. I am in a kindergarten. In summer camp."

"Then why are you sitting here all by yourself?"

"This is isolation ward."

"I don't know such a word," said Kesha with a sigh.

"Isolation ward? It's where people are placed when they're ill—to keep them away from those that are well."

"Are you ill?"

"No. I breathed in a grain of rice and coughed something terrible. They thought it was whooping cough. But they no longer think so."

"Then why do they keep you here?"

"I am to stay here for three days. To make sure that nothing happens."

"Well," said Kesha. "Something has happened to me."

Kesha walked up to Rostik and laid his head on his lap. Rostik patted this head. One of Kesha's ears was brown, and the tip of his tail was brown too. And he had a big brown spot on his side. The rest of him was white. His eyes were big, dark and sad. It was clear his life had been no bed of roses.

"You see," said Rostik, "if I go away, they will look for me and worry."

"Can't you ask them to let you go?"

"Ha!" said Rostik. "Not a hope!" Kesha's tale uncoiled and hung down to the ground.

"Can't be helped then," he said and gave a long nervous yawn. "I have been nobody's dog for so long, and now I thought..."

"Let's go!" Rostik interrupted him in mid-word.

"Are you mad?" the birch-tree said in alarm and waved its branches.

"I am not ill," Rostik said with assurance. "I simply breathed in a grain of rice and started coughing. That means I am allowed to go for a walk. Maria Vassilievna has gone with the kids to gather daisies. Lunch is a long time off. Come on, Kesha, don't stand there like that!"

Kesha dashed into the hazel bush, soaring away the sunsports which were hiding there.

They ran out onto the footpath that led down a hill. The pine-trees which grew on the hill did not like what they saw and kept pushing out into the path to bar Rostik's way.

Rostik and Kesha came down the hill at last and walked more slowly. The path stopped meandering and ran straight across a

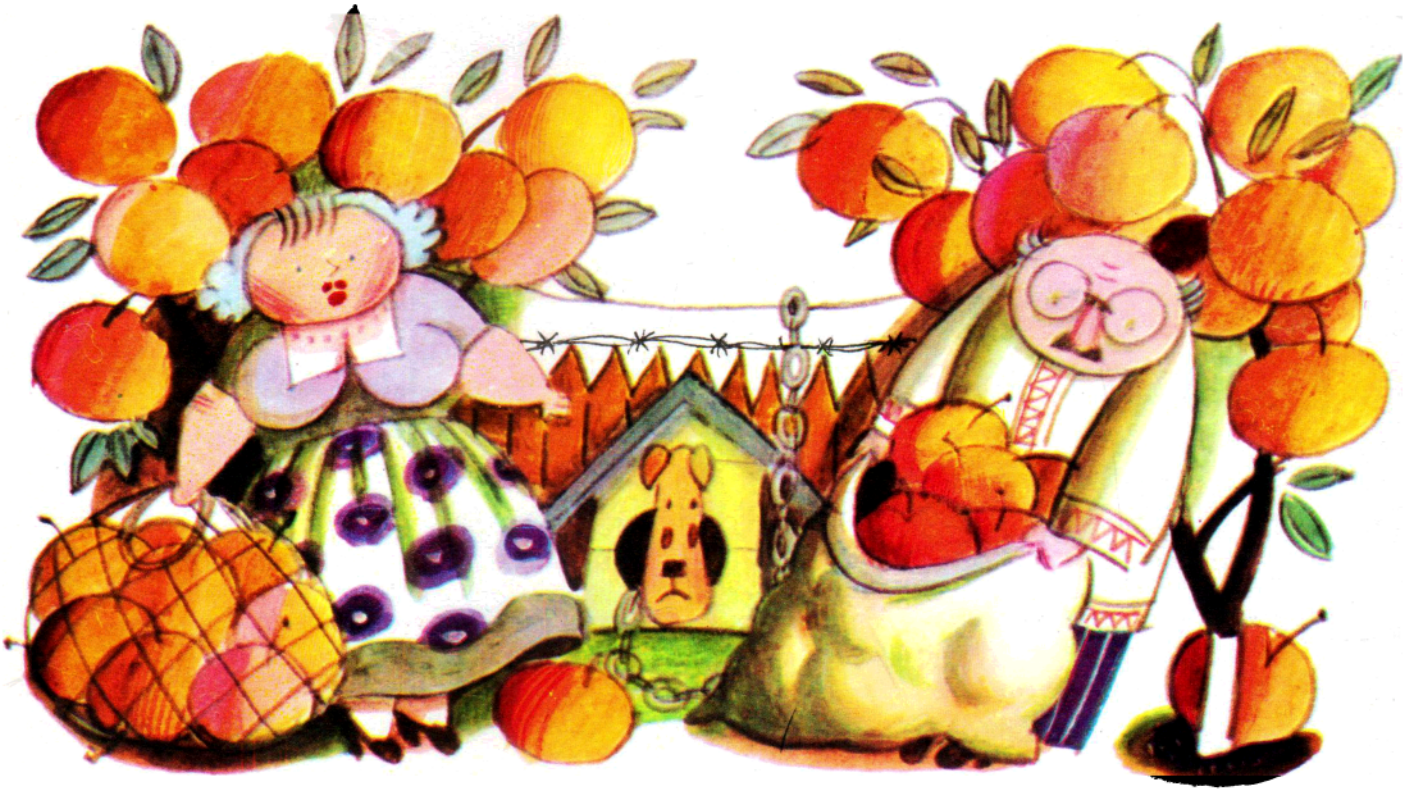
meadow. Rostik took a look round. High overhead soared a large bird, its wings outspread. The meadow stretched far into the distance and merged with the sky at the horizon. There were no houses to be seen, just grass, bright green, thick and shiny.

"Kesha," said Rostik, "where does Gleb live?"

"There," said Kesha, "where the houses are. Beyond the big water."

"On the other side of the river?"

"I suppose so."



Kesha had been running ahead showing the way.

Rostik suddenly stopped. Kesha stopped too.

"Kesha," said Rostik, "why did they call you Tuzik before?"

Kesha uncoiled his tail and lowered it down.

"That was a long time ago," he said reluctantly. "In puppyhood."

"Where?"

"Not where but when. In puppyhood. What d'you call it? When I was a little puppy."

"Well, what was it like?"

"I had masters, sort of. People. They called me Tuzik."

"And what were their names?"

"They had not any. Only good masters have names. Bad masters are simply masters."

"What did they make you do?"

"I guarded their orchard. At first cherry-trees. Then apples." Kesha was speaking slowly as though each word cost him an effort, and Rostik thought that those people must have treated him shabbily indeed. "They put me on a chain," Kesha continued. "And what was the point of it?"

"On a chain?"

"Yes. And then they went away. They took their apples, sacks and sacks of them. And their jam, jars and jars. And left me behind."

"Chained up?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I pulled and pulled until the chain broke. At first I thought they would come back. I waited for them. Then I went wandering. Well, come on, why are we standing here?"

Kesha ran on ahead.

Rostik quickened his steps too, and soon saw the river.

The river was broad and smooth; the bank was also broad and had clean white sand on it with low bushes growing in the sand here and there.

A motor boat chugged past.

The wind brought the smell of petrol. Then it flew back to the river once again and returned with the smell of water weeds and fresh river water.

Chapter Two

DIFFERENT PEOPLE ON THE FERRY

The ferry built of logs and boards and looking like a big raft pushed off the shore. Water began to smack by its sides. The ferryman spinned the wheel attached to the side and went off into a little cabin which had no door and had a poster stuck to one of

its three walls: "Air your room often." One end of the poster had come unstuck, and the fresh river wind was pulling at the corner.

Rostik and Kesha were sitting behind some big sacks filled with something hard. The ferry slid slowly through the water, rolling slightly.

"Aren't you afraid of the grandfather?" Kesha asked Rostik.

"No, I'm not," said Rostik, though a bit doubtfully. Of course he was afraid of a strange grandfather, but he had to help Kesha.

"I don't think he will throw boots at you," Kesha thought aloud. "They only throw boots at dogs."

"But not all people do that," Rostik reassured Kesha. "Only mean people do. Who is Gleb staying with? Is he on holiday?"

"He is visiting with his grandfather. In summer he always comes to his grandfather."

"And at other times?"

"What other times—when it is cold?"

"Yes, in autumn and winter..."

"Then he lives with his mother in town."

"Then he is on holiday here," Rostik decided.

The bank gradually moved away. At the landing stage a barefoot boy pulled a little fish out of the water with a long rod. White ducks swam up to the sedge growing by the bank, quacked loudly, obviously telling it an important piece of news, and swam off.

Water was splashing under the ferry's flat bottom as though asking: "All right? Are you all right?"

The sun cast merry spots on the river. A pleasant resinous smoke was wafted from the opposite bank. The sky was clear. There was not a cloud, and no rain or storm threatened. Rostik leaned against the sack, closed his eyes and smiled. How fine it was on the river!

"What are you doing here?" suddenly came a bellow from behind the sack, and Rostik jumped. A big woman was looking down on him from behind the sack.

Rostik stared at her in fright.

"Whose dog is that? Dogs all over the place!"

Kesha lowered his tail.

"He'll make the child break out in sores."

Rostik looked round. Where was that woman's child? There were two huge sacks, like the two sideboards at the cleaners' on the corner of Rostik's street.

"Whose dog is that?"

"It's my dog," said Rostik.

"Look at him! It's his dog, if you please! And what if it bites everybody?"

"Why should it bite?"

"I don't like biting," said Kesha.

"There, now he barks!" The woman jumped back and collided with her own tight sack. Rostik realised she did not understand what Kesha said.

"He does not bite people," Rostik said.

"How can you tell? A dog is a dog. You don't know what it may go and do."

Rostik looked at the woman sulkily.

"Don't you raise all this noise, lady, it's not nice to hear," somebody else said from behind the sack, and a smallish old man appeared. He wore white trousers and limped a little.

"What do you meddle for?" the woman attacked the old man.

"This is what," the old man said. "You don't understand. A child takes care of a dog, and he learns to think of others. He will think of his comrade when he goes into battle. And you want a tree to have no root."

"Listen to him talk!" the woman said contemptuously.

The ferryman came out of his cabin to see what the noise was about.

"Dogs can only be ferried in muzzles," he said without stopping to consider who was right and who was wrong. "Where's your muzzle?"

Rostik's heart began to pound in alarm.

The old man said, "But the dog is very quiet."

"I won't harm anyone," Kesha said.

"No barking is allowed on the ferry," said the ferryman. "Dogs must have muzzles on. According to the rules. That's how it is."

"You aren't going to throw it off the ferry in the middle of the river, are you?" the old man cried indignantly.

"The rules can't be violated in the middle of the river either," the ferryman said sternly.

"Rostik," said Kesha, "I'll swim across. I don't mind, really."

Kesha crawled under the railing, jumped head forward, surfaced, shook his head and started swimming, moving his paws

quickly and trying to keep level with the ferry, but lagging behind all the same little by little.

His eyes were fixed on Rostik, while Rostik stood by the railing saying nothing: his jaws felt cramped. The old man came up to him and stroked his head.

"Don't get upset, little chicken. Look how well he swims. A good dog that. Very clever. He understands everything, just can't talk, that's all."

"He *can* too," Rostik almost said, but kept his tongue. If only they reached the other bank soon. It was quite near already. He could see the landing stage, the sedge by the water's edge and ducks swimming, also white, like the ones on their own side. If only they got there quickly and found Gleb so that Kesha could have a master and a home.

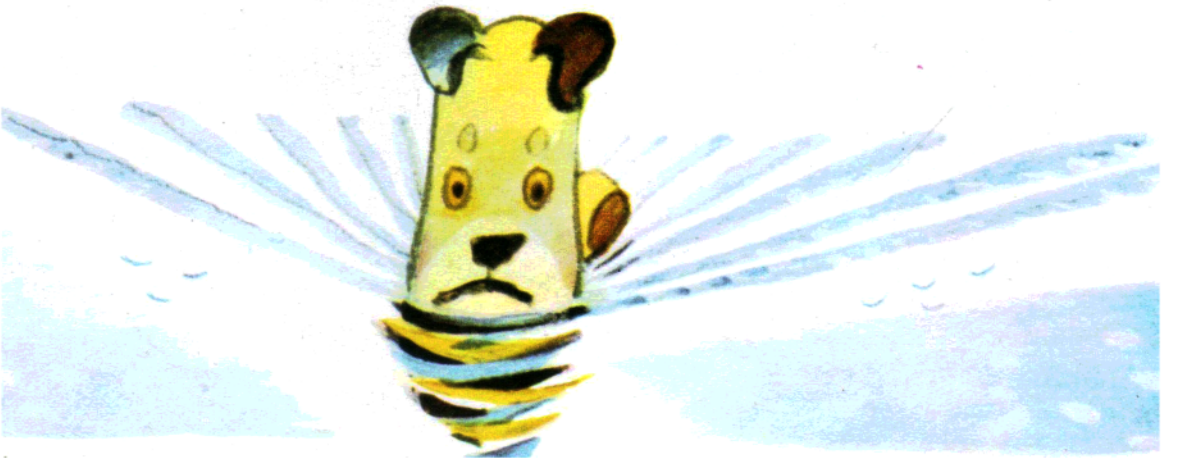
The ferry landed. Rostik went ashore in a bit of a panic. For a moment he had lost sight of Kesha and felt his temperature rising. Could he be really falling ill?

But then he saw Kesha, who was approaching the bank quickly, moving his paws evenly and sometimes lapping at the water. Then he touched bottom and walked. He got out onto the bank, twitched his coat and shook himself.

Rostik patted his wet fur. Kesha wagged his tail and smiled.

Two large boats lay on the bank, their black tarred bottoms up. A white kid wearing a bell on its neck was nibbling at the grass.

The bank rose evenly. A rutty sandy road led to the village. By the road grew an old poplar, not far from it there was a clump of



elder bushes. Their leaves and berries were coated with dust raised by the passing carts and lorries.

Rostik and Kesha started up the road. Kesha's thick fur dried soon in the sun and the wet strands fluffed up.

"Is it far?" asked Rostik.

"Not far," answered Kesha happy that he would see Gleb soon.

Chapter Three

ROSTIK LOSES KESHA

It was great fun going down the village street. There was a terrific lot of lilac. One never sees so much lilac in town. Mauve, white, pink, plain and double-petalled, it flooded all front-gardens. Its bunches swayed proudly in the breeze.

"Do admire us," they seemed to say. "Aren't we lovely, we are the double-petalled Persian kind!"

Behind another fence was a sea of white blossom. "And we are white and elegant, we are bright, transparent, fragrant..."

Little benches stood by each gate. Rostik would very much like to sit on such a bench for a while, doing nothing, looking at the sky and swinging his feet a little. But there was no time because Kesha was in a hurry. He would run ahead of Rostik, then stop and look back, as though asking, "Coming?"

What a clever, what a nice dog was Kesha, Rostik was thinking. They would soon come to that old man's house, Rostik would talk to Gleb... Suddenly he had a wistful thought: I wish Kesha was my dog. He did not say it outloud, did not even think it, just felt it inside himself. One ear brown, and the tail brown, and a brown spot on his white side... What sort of person was that Gleb?

"Gleb is all right," said Kesha as though guessing his doubts.

Rostik said nothing and silently jumped across a ditch. They were now walking along the middle of a narrow street in soft warm dust, leaving neat footprints behind them.

Suddenly a brown cow came from round the corner. Then a lot of sheep poured after her, then more cows. They filled the street and walked brushing the fences of the front-gardens with their swollen sides and producing funny scraping noises. Rostik could

hear the snapping of the shepherd's whip, shouts, mooing and bleating.

A black cow with a white star on her forehead suddenly stopped as she passed Rostik, stared at him, then lowered her head and pointed her lone horn at him. The second horn was broken off, and this somehow made her seem more frightening. Rostik climbed a bench and stood stock-still, holding onto a fence, his eyes glued to the cow. But the cow merely swung her head, turned and followed the herd.

Gradually the stream of cows began to thin out. The procession was brought up by the shepherd, who no longer snapped his whip but just carried it slung across his shoulder. The end of the whip dragged in the dust, like a long thin tail. Rostik climbed down from his bench.

The road had been thoroughly spoiled, churned up by the hoof-marks and fouled up by cow-cakes. A branch of lilac had been broken off at the opposite fence.

But where was Kesha? Kesha was not to be seen anywhere! Rostik called him, but there was no answer. "Kesha! Kesha! Kesha!" called Rostik, louder and louder.

There was no Kesha.

Rostik ran to the street corner, then came back.

"Kesha! Kesha! Kesha!"

Where could he have got to? Went off with the herd? Why? Hid in some yard? Why didn't he show up then?

A gate creaked? Was that Kesha? No, it wasn't.

A very old woman looked out of the gate.

"Ivan, is that you, boy? Have you seen Ivan, sonny?"

"No," said Rostik. "Has Kesha gone into your yard?" he asked hopefully.

"What Kesha? If you mean Shuranins' boy, he's Pasha, not Kesha."

"I don't know Pasha. Kesha is a dog."

"A dog he is," the old woman said. She was evidently annoyed with Pasha Shuranin. "Come in, boy, give me a hand. Help me pour some kerosene into the primus-stove. My hands shake so. I called Ivan, but he's never here when he's wanted."

With a final glance over his shoulder to see if Kesha had appeared, Rostik followed the old woman into the yard. A

primus-stove stood on the front steps, and beside it stood a can of kerosene. The old woman screwed off the cap in the stove and put a funnel into the opening.

"Here, fill it with kerosene, I can't with my hands shaking so. I can still milk the cow, but I splash kerosene all over the place."

Rostik lifted the can. It was full and quite heavy. He even swayed under its weight. A broad stream of kerosene poured into the funnel. Some of it got onto his shoe.

"Thank you, sonny," said the old woman. "Would you like some milk?"

Rostik said no thank you and ran out into the street. Perhaps Kesha was waiting for him there? But no, there was no Kesha. What would happen now? Kesha wouldn't be able to speak to Gleb if he did not have Rostik with him. And what about Rostik himself? In the first place, he did not know the way back to the ferry. In the

second, in the second... Really, it couldn't be that he had just gone and lost Kesha, and would not help him, and would not know how things worked out, and generally, he missed Kesha. Rostik began to cry.

"What are you doing here?" he heard. A barefoot boy came up to him. He looked very sure of himself. "Who are you—one of the summer folk?"

"No, I am not."

"Not one of them holiday-makers?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Rostik."

"That means Rostislav. And I'm Ivan."

The boy stretched out his hand.

"Handshaking is an old custom," he said in a voice that reminded Rostik of a radio announcer's. "In the old times tribal chiefs used to give their right hands to each other to show they held no weapons... Do you know when we mark the Day of the Geologists?"

Rostik shook his head.

"You don't? Much you know then! It's on the fourth of April. And do you know what planets are visible in April?"

"No."

"Saturn. And there's nothing to laugh at."

Rostik sighed. Laughing was furthest from his mind.

"What's the matter with you?"

"How?"

"You look as though you're going to bawl."

"I lost a dog."

"An Alsatian?"

"No, Kesha."

"Kesha is his name, is it? Is he a borzoi? Borzois can run with the speed of a hundred kilometres an hour."

"No, he is not a borzoi. But he is very clever."

"They're all clever. Dogs are used in the war."

"How's that?"

"During the Patriotic War specially trained dogs with mines in their packs threw themselves under enemy tanks and destroyed them."

Ivan supplied the information at a staccato, looking not at Rostik but somewhere above his head, as though he was not speaking but reading. Then he glanced at Rostik to find out that he had not been comforted.

"Wait a minute, we'll think of something."

Ivan started thinking. He popped his eyes and pulled forward his lips to make thinking more effective.

"You know what? Let's go to Grandpa Koldyr."

"Who?"

"Well, he's an old man."

"Your grandfather?"

"No. He's sort of ... everybody's. His name's Foma Nikitich. But they call him Koldyr."

"What does it mean?"

"You know there are sort of growths on birch-trees, very hard. They call it *kap.* Another name for it is *koldyr.* You can't chop it across with an axe. It's even very difficult to saw across it."

"And why do they call the old man that?"

"Because he is hardy. And he is a good person. He'll think of a way to find your dog. Come along!"

"Is it far to go?"

"He lives beyond the Light Spinney, at the tar distillery. Gran!" Ivan shouted into the gate. "I am off to the distillery!"

"Have a bite to eat at least. I've made some pancakes here."

Rostik swallowed hungrily.

"Come on, Rostislav," Ivan commanded. They walked round the corner from which the ill-omened herd had appeared so unexpectedly.

Perhaps this Grandpa Koldyr will really find Kesha, Rostik was thinking. Ivan seems to be very sure he will. He felt a bit easier in his heart, now that hope was glimmering.

The street proved to be very long. Rostik looked about him curiously. All the houses were different. One was small and made of grey logs and had tiny windows. The other was big, and covered with planking so that you could not see the logs. The planks were painted brown and the edging on the windows was white. It was a very pretty house. And all houses, whether big or small, had television aerials sticking up not on the roofs but on long poles dug into the ground beside the porch. Then they came to a little shed

which stood sideways to the street and was not fenced off. It bore a large faded sign—"Mushroom Procurements". For greater effect it had two yellow mushrooms and a sprig of cranberry painted underneath it. A huge padlock hung on the door of the shed and on the ground beside it lay some dry barrels. The mushroom season had not begun yet. A group of starlings were pecking at something on the ground near the shed. When Ivan and Rostik approached them, they flushed up all at once.

Rostik was again worrying about Kesha.

"Won't the old man be angry?" he asked.

"Why? What for?"

"Well, because we came to him about some dog or other."

"He is never angry without reason. Grandpa Koldyr is a great old man."

"Will he find Kesha?"

"I told you Grandpa Koldyr will think of something."

The street ended. The road swerved to the left, passing a big shed in front of which lay an odd object: it consisted of two wheels and iron ribs between them, which looked like an X-ray picture of the rib cage which Rostik had had done before going to camp.

"This is a shocker," said Ivan. "The mowing machine cuts the grass, and the shocker, this here machine, gathers the hay into shocks. But the hay-making hasn't started yet—the grass is not ready. We have water-meadows here with perennial grasses mostly, timothy and such like."

Again Ivan was talking like a radio announcer.

"How come you know all this?" Rostik asked. "Do they teach you about it in school?"

"No. In school they teach you Russian and maths. I like to read calendars. They tell about all kinds of things. I have already read two—for the year before last and the one before. Now I'm going to read the calendar for last year and for this one. Then I'll know everything."

Rostik decided that Ivan had a good idea there.

Soon the road went downhill and entered a pinewood at a run. It was, indeed, a light spinney. The pines grew far apart and did not stand in each other's way. The sunrays dived into the soft moss and seemed to light it up from within. The orange trunks of the pines would flare up brightly when the sun lit them up and then seemed

to be switched off. The sky showed through the pine boughs, which stirred and swayed all the time a little, now blocking out the sun, now letting it through again. There was an even hum around and it comforted Rostik. The pines seemed to be saying: "You'll find Kesha. You'll find Kesha." Then the pines moved away from the road a bit, forming a clearing. The road led the boys to the edge of the wood. The earth here was black and the grass was black too. The sun was reflected in black oily puddles.

"This is the tar distillery," said Ivan. "It's not working today."

Rostik saw two huge ovens—at any rate they had to be ovens. But they were round in shape, made of brick and smeared with clay. Each oven had a chimney like the ones cottages have. Between the ovens stood a log cabin with no windows. It also had a chimney sticking up on its roof, but it was not of brick, like the other two, but of iron. Beside the cabin lay three iron casks. Nearby stood a board on two poles, like those that are put up in the city to post up notices. It was painted red and instead of notices had an axe, also red, and a red bucket hung on it.

Around the distillery lay heaps of dry tree-stumps. Yet another heap lay loaded on a trailer. It must have just been brought by the tractor, which was chugging angrily as it tried to turn around.

Some way off stood a cottage, with a little garden around it surrounded by a paling. Bunches of some yellow flowers hung on the fence, drying.

"Those are sand immortelles," said Ivan.

"And where is the old man?" Rostik asked in a frightened voice.

"Must be somewhere about. Grandpa Koldyr!" Ivan yelled at the top of his voice.

"I'm here. Who is it?" came a voice in response.

"Must be in the garden," Ivan guessed.

A wicket squeaked and Grandpa Koldyr came into view. Bah, it was the very same old man from the ferry! Only now he was wearing black pants, old and patched-up.

"Oh, it's you, Ivan? And you too, little chicken? And where is your dog?"

"He lost his dog." Ivan answered for Rostik. "Perhaps somebody put it on a chain? It would have found him by his tracks. Dogs' sense of smell is twelve thousand times as keen as man's."

"Yes, it should have found him," the old man confirmed. He came up to the dispirited Rostik and put his hand on his shoulder. "Is that the smell of kerosene?" he asked sniffing.

"I helped a granny to pour it out," said Rostik.

"And splashed some on your foot?"

"Yes, a little got into my shoe. But it's dried already."

"It may be dry, but the kerosene smell is stronger than your own. That's why the dog cannot find you."

Rostik prepared to burst into tears.

Chapter Four

KESHA WITHOUT ROSTIK

When Kesha's damp nose was assailed by the acrid smell of a cow herd, he had jumped to the fence, but not where the bench stood, but on the opposite side of the street. The herd filled the street, separating Kesha from Rostik and moving in an endless frightening stream. A brown cow lowered her head and swung it at Kesha. Kesha started retreating along the fence. The hooves stamped in the dust, the dust filled his nose and eyes. The shepherd, so far invisible and unsmelling, was cracking his whip somewhere behind. A cow's sharp hoof struck the ground right beside Kesha. Kesha dodged it, but there was nowhere to hide, for the herd had filled the whole street. Kesha pressed himself to the fence. Suddenly the fence gave way and Kesha found himself inside a garden. He had pressed a wicket open, but once he was in, it swung close behind him. Kesha stood before it silently. It did not open again. He scratched it with a paw. The wicket remained as it was.

"Open, please," he asked it.

The wicket did nothing of the sort.

"Rostik!" Kesha called.

But Rostik was standing on the bench on the other side of the street and could not hear him.

"Doggie!" Kesha suddenly heard a thick voice, like a bumblebee's. "Come here, doggie!"

Kesha looked round. A little girl had jumped down from a swing which hung on two poles in the garden and come up to Kesha.

"The wicket does not open," Kesha said. "Let me out, please." And he gave a wag of his tail.

"You're a nice doggie," the girl went on in her funny bass. "D'you want to live with me?"

"Excuse me," Kesha said, "but I can't. Rostik is waiting for me. Let me out, please."

"Why are you barking? Want me to tie a bow on your head?"

"Let me out! Let me out!"

"Why are you barking all the time? Are you hungry?"

"You don't understand," Kesha thought. "Gleb understands me. So does Kesha. But you don't."

"Come on, doggie."

Kesha went after the girl into the house. He heard the stamping and mooing stop out in the street, the smell of milk and cow hide was gone. He made yet another attempt in the porch.

"Rostik!"

But Rostik was pouring out the kerosene for the old lady at that moment.

What was Kesha to do? Of course he could bite the girl, to make her cry and drive him away. But Kesha could not do that. If asked

why, he would never be able to explain. He did not know that there was a noble streak in a dog's nature which did not let it bite a child.

The girl brought Kesha into the kitchen. There was a frying-pan on the table which smelled very nice.

"Here," said the girl, "have a meat-ball. Auntie Nora made a whole panful of them. I don't like them."

She lifted the lid, took a meat-ball with a fork and dropped it on the floor. Kesha ate it up. He was really very hungry. Perhaps he should not have accepted food in a house where he could not remain, but he ate it. And even licked the floorboard on which the meat-ball had lain.

"Ariadna!"

A middle-aged woman in a short skirt, silk shirt and a gym shoes came into the kitchen.

"What is this dog doing in the kitchen, Ariadna?"

"He will live with us, Aunt Nora."

"No, he won't."

"I have nobody to play with, Aunt Nora. You don't let me play with Ivan. I shall play with this dog."

"Nonsense! Ivan is no company for you, and this dog will give you an infection. We shall play tennis."

"I don't want to play tennis!"

"Tennis has prolonged my youth and given meaning to my life. Tennis is a wonderful sport."

Kesha did not know the meaning of the word "tennis" but decided not to ask.

"Take your racket, Ariadna, we are going to the tennis court!"

"But it's not a court, Aunt Nora, it's just a bit of meadow by the pond."

"Stop talking nonsense! Take your racket. I promised your parents to make a proper person of you."

"Am I not a proper person now?"

"A proper person must be able to play tennis."

"Can the doggie stay at home, Aunt Nora?" the girl asked hopefully.

"Stop talking rot, Ariadna!"

"Aunt Nora, please let me keep the dog... I'll call him Rover. No, Jack. Or Rex. Come here, Rex!"

Aunt Nora picked up two tennis rackets, a big and a small one and went to the wicket. The wicket obeyed her and opened. Kesha dashed out and called, "Rostik!"

But Rostik was nowhere in sight. Kesha ran across the street. No Rostik. The bench smelled of Rostik. Kesha began sniffing the road. A slight smell of cows, a strange person... Kerosene! More kerosene! Kesha sneezed.

Ariadna looked back.

"Rex, come with us!"

Kesha went a little way with the girl and her aunt—out of politeness. Then he lagged behind and ran back to the bench that smelled of Rostik. He ought to be somewhere here. The bench smelled of him. But where had he gone afterwards? There were no tracks of him by the fence, nor in the middle of the street—nowhere at all! What would now happen to Rostik? He would get lost. Kesha had brought him here. Rostik did not know the way back. He was a fine boy, a true friend. His heart was in the right place, and he understood everything. There was not a trace of him anywhere. What was Kesha to do?

"What's the matter, Red Ear? Did you get lost?"

A tall blue-eyed man stood in the middle of the road smiling down on Kesha. The man looked friendly, and Kesha came up to him.

The man squatted before Kesha in the middle of a dusty road. He was Lieutenant Groshev, a militiaman.

Chapter Five

ANXIETY

The kindergarten teacher Maria Vassilievna was depressed. To think they should have a child fall ill the second day after arrival at the summer camp. She climbed the steps slowly, holding a plate of soup in both hands and called,

"Rostik!"

There was no answer.

"Kharitonov!" she shouted a bit testily. "Open the door, my hands are full."

Silence.

Maria Vassilievna balanced the plate on the barrier and pulled the door handle.

It was quiet in the isolation ward.

The breeze blew in the gauze curtain in the window, and a sun spot lay sprawled on the pillow.

The birch-tree was silent, having obviously decided not to interfere.

"Rostislav!"

It was very quiet.

Forgetting about the plate of soup, Maria Vassilievna went down the porch and walked around the house.

The boy was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, I see, Elizaveta Elizarovna must be examining him in her surgery."

Maria Vassilievna started for the surgery but met Elizaveta Elizarovna before she walked half the way to it.

"Well, how is the tussis? I mean the cough?"

"Haven't you got Kharitonov, Elizaveta Elizarovna?"

"I'm on my way to have a look at him. Is he still coughing?"

"He's not there."

"Who?"

"The Kharitonov boy."

"What do you mean, Maria Vassilievna. A child with a suspicion of an infection must remain in the isolation ward! Of course it may not be pertussis after all, but you mustn't let him mix with the other children yet. Are you in your right mind?"

"He is not with the other children. They're having lunch."

"Excuse me, Maria Vassilievna, but I simply don't understand you."

* * *

"Has anybody seen Rostik, children?"

"I saw him yesterday, but then they put him into the isolation ward, didn't they?"

"Maria Vassilievna, I saw a frog, but Pavlik says it's a toad. But it isn't, it has no warts!"

"I ask you if Kharitonov has come here?"

"No."

"No, he hasn't."
"An owl comes at night—if one doesn't sleep."
"Gimme back my spoon, Pavlik!"
"Well, eat up fast and go and wash your hands!"

* * *

"It's three o'clock already. What if he lost his way?"
"Where can one lose his way hereabout, Elizaveta Elizarovna? Three pines and three birches, and a meadow stretching all the way to the river. Just let me lay my hands on him!"
"O god, I've quite forgotten about the river! What if he fell into the water?"
"Let's go down there. There's a ferry and people would have seen him..."
"I'll go mad!"

* * *

"Have you been here long?"
"Yes, ladies, a long time. Nobody wants to be ferried—all are in the fields working."
"You haven't seen a boy, have you?"
"There was one fishing."
"No, ours is small, six years old."
"I wouldn't know."
"Please, tell me, nobody got drowned here, did he?"
"Oh yes, one did."
"What!"
"When?"
"When I was a boy, in thirty-eight I think it was... One man drowned himself—they said he was off his rocker."
"Why did you frighten us so?"

* * *

"Hello!"
"Duty desk."
"Is this the militia office?"

"Yes."

"We've lost a child."

"You've lost what?"

"A child."

"What child? Where are you calling from?"

"It's the kindergarten camp of the linen mill."

"Please tell me the details. When did you miss him? What does he look like?"

"Are you sure he hasn't... You see we are terrified lest he got drowned."

"No, there have been no accidents on water today. Well, tell me all about it."

"Maria Vassilievna, you tell him. I feel I'm going mad."

* * *

"What did they say?"

"They said they'd be looking for him. If only I could put my hands on him! I only left him alone for an hour. After all I can't be everywhere at once. Dussia promised to keep an eye on him. And then she went and got busy with the lunch. She should have locked him up!"

"Maria Vassilievna, and what if he..."

"What?"

"If he decided to go home?"

"Why should he? He has been attending kindergarten since he was three. Nothing like that ever occurred to him."

"Perhaps we should call his parents?"

"But they're at work."

"Let's call them at the mill."

"What's the point? His mother will be alarmed. Perhaps he will come back in half an hour."

"Do you think so? Do you think he will?"

"I'll go have a look at the children. They're having their nap now. And I'll look in the isolation ward too."

* * *

"Who's not sleeping there? Pavlik, close your eyes this minute."

"Have you found Rostik, Maria Vassilievna?"

"We never lost him. Go to sleep, Pavlik."

"Where is he then, Maria Vassilievna?"

"He's in the isolation ward. Sleep now."

"Will he come back here soon?"

"Don't bother other children, Pavlik. Go to sleep."

"I'm sleeping."

Chapter Six

LIEUTENANT GROSHEV

"Well, Red Ear, what's the matter? Lost your master, have you?"

Lieutenant patted Kesha on the head.

"I saw you running along that fence and then along the other. Are you looking for someone?"

Kesha looked at him in hesitation and did not answer: he could not be sure the man would understand him.

"Are you well, Red Ear? Hm, the nose is cool. So you're well. You look rather out of sorts though. What's your name?"

"Kesha," Kesha ventured to reply.

"Kesha? A very nice name."

Kesha looked up at Lieutenant Groshev.

Then Kesha's tail began to wag and soon all of Kesha, from nose to the tip of his tail, became filled with joy. He understood! Kesha's words were not just meaningless barking to him!

"And I work in militia. My name is Lieutenant Groshev," the man introduced himself. "Where do you live?"

Where could a homeless dog live, with despair and hope alternating in his heart? Kesha felt he could trust Lieutenant Groshev, like he had trusted Gleb and then Rostik, and he told Lieutenant Groshev his uncomplicated dog's story.

"He became lost, you say?"

"Yes," Kesha confirmed. "We must find him. Without me he will never find the way back. He does not know the way, Rostik doesn't."

"Yes," the lieutenant drawled. "Well, you know what, Kesha, let me first attend to a complain in my division—it's my division now. In a word, we shall attend to this bit of business, and then we shall look for your pal. Shall we go to Grandpa Koldyr, perhaps? Children hang around him all the time. One might think he's keeping bees, not distilling tar."

Before Kesha could say anything in reply, they heard a kind of screeching in the distance. Some woman was yelling her head off, and though one could not make out the words, the noise was very unpleasant.

* * *

Lieutenant Groshev and Kesha went in the direction of the screeching. They walked the length of a narrow lane and found themselves by a small round pond. Geese were swimming in the pond some distance off the bank, exchanging remarks in rusty voices. In the meadow by the pond Aunt Nora and Ariadna were tossing a ball with rackets. The screeching voice belonged to the same nasty woman from the ferry who had called Kesha the most

hated name he knew—Dogsallovertheplace. Aunt Nora had a stony face, while Ariadna looked frightened. The tennis ball kept saying "pok-pok-pok".

"What's the matter?" asked Lieutenant Groshev. "They promised us fine weather in the forecast and here I hear thunderbolts."

"Just look at them, Comrade Militiaman. I have my geese grazing here, and they play ball in the pasture. It is harmful for the birds."

"Is it? Don't they like sports?"

"What sports?" the woman asked stupidly. "This here woman ought to be fined, that's what I said in my complaint."

"Yes, I read it with great interest," said Lieutenant Groshev.

"So you are our division inspector?"

"That's right, as of today."

"Very well then. I described it all there. It's not right to frighten geese."

"Are those the frightened geese?" Lieutenant Groshev said nodding at the geese in the pond.

"Yes, those are my geese."

"They don't look very frightened to me."

"What's that?" the woman asked stupidly again.

All the while Lieutenant Groshev was speaking, Aunt Nora stood

motionlessly like a statue in a park looking away above the geese's heads.

Ariadna, who was frightened a bit when she saw the militiaman, now realised there was nothing to be afraid of and looked up.

"Rex, Rex, Aunt Nora, here's our Rex," she hooted in her bass voice. "Rex, Rex, come here." And Ariadna made a bee-line for Kesha.

Kesha backed away, remembering the mean wicket, and tried hiding behind Lieutenant Groshev's leg. At the mention of the dog, the nasty woman burst out with new indignation.

"See, Comrade militiaman? They bring dogs too. A dog can kill a goose. A fine that's what they need!"

"Who, dogs?"

The woman looked at Lieutenant Groshev blankly, then, realising he was joking, giggled uncertainly.

The next moment she began speaking rapidly before somebody interrupted her:

"A woman I take milk to in town told me dogs do harm to the trees, make them dry up..."

"Why, do they pee kerosene, or what?" Lieutenant Groshev interrupted her. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself writing complaints about little things like this. So they play tennis, so your geese swim here, so dogs run about—what is it to you? You must learn to live in peace with your neighbours."

"Won't you fine them?" asked the woman.

"There is nobody to fine and no reason to either," Lieutenant Groshev answered calmly.

He saluted the woman from the ferry, then Aunt Nora and strode off.

Kesha ran after him.

"What's the matter now, Red Ear? So your name is Rex and not Kesha?"

"Oh no! I told you... Those are the people from the garden with the wicket."

"I see," said Lieutenant Groshev, obviously thinking some thoughts of his own. Then he spoke them aloud, "They know how to write. Their hands have education, but their hearts are ignorant." "Here we are," he said to Kesha.

The militia station was a small house with four windows, its walls painted blue.

The house had no front garden, but there was a lilac bush blossoming by the porch and a hollyhock that was tall and had plenty of buds, but had not broken into flower yet.

"This is our station," said Lieutenant Groshev. "Wait for me on the porch, I'll be back in a moment. Then we'll look for your pal."

"Won't they chase me away?"

"Who 'they'? We're all nice people here. Don't be afraid."

Kesha sat down.

Lieutenant Groshev entered the blue house and came out again very soon.

"It appears we have more work to do, Kesha. A little boy Kharitonov's got lost. The man on duty did not catch his first name. Says it sounded like 'caustic'. That's no name for a boy, is it? Well, let's go, you'll help me look for him, will you? And after that we'll look for your pal."

Chapter Seven

CRIMINALS IN AN ELDER BUSH

"Don't you cry, my little chicken," Grandpa Koldyr said kindly. "Things are not that bad. I'm sure we'll find a way of helping you. Come with me."

The old man took Rostik to the kitchen garden behind the house. Poppies were flowering over young cucumber plants.

A water-pot was nailed to the trunk of the lone pine-tree that stood in the garden. Below it, on the ground, stood a saucer with a piece of soap.

"Wash your feet now," said the old man and pressed the tip of the wash-pot upwards.

Water warmed by the sun spurted down. Rostik threw off his sandals.

After a while the old man said, sniffing:

"I think we've washed the kerosene off."

"But what about the dog?" asked Ivan.

"We'll find the dog. But won't your mother be looking for you, little chicken?"

"My mother is at work in town. She works on the linen mill."

"I see. So you live with your Granny then?"

"No, Granny lives far away, in Penza."

"Who do you live with then?"

"With the kindergarten."

"Who's that?"

"It's on the other side of the river," Ivan broke in. "The kindergarten of the linen mill."

"Oh, that's why I saw you on the ferry. With a dog, too. Wait a minute, won't they be looking for you in the kindergarten?"

Rostik lowered his head.

"I don't know what to do," he said honestly.

And he told Grandpa Koldyr the whole story, from the beginning.

"Gleb, you say his name is," the old man asked.

"He must be the grandson of Dmitry Glebych." They've always had Glebs in their family. Yes. Dmitry Glebych is not an easy man to deal with. I say, little bricks! We can't alarm people like that. You go with the little chap to the ferry, Ivan, and take him back to the kindergarten. They will be looking high and low for him there."

"What about Kesha?" Rostik asked sadly.

"I'll go to Dmitry Glebych and have a look-see. He's a clever dog, perhaps he'll come there."

"Yes, Kesha is clever," Rostik said.

"Of course he's clever," the old man confirmed. "Off you go, chickens. Come and see me later on, Ivan, I've mended your tire. It's drying up."

Ivan and Rostik walked back to the village.

For a while they walked in silence. The sun was hidden behind a cloud, the pinewood no longer sparkled with light, and Rostik's mood was dark too.

"I say, Rostislav, let's drop in at our place for a minute. I'm mighty hungry. Granny has been baking pancakes."

There was the bench. And there the gate. Ivan dived into the garden. Rostik remained outside to wait for him. There were lots of dogs' tracks in the dust of the street. Were they Kesha's? No, hardly. There were lots of dogs in the village.

Ivan peered out of the gate. His face wore the expression of

cunning. He winked at Rostik and disappeared again. Another minute later the gate flew open with a crash and Ivan raced out of the garden leading a moped.

"See that?" he yelled exultantly. "What d'you think? Fedka has forgotten to lock up his moped. We'll ride to the ferry in a jiffy!"

"Do they let you?"

"Who's going to ask? He forgot to lock it up, so why ask?"

The moped shone with nickel. There was a blue passenger seat behind the saddle.

"Climb on that seat!" Ivan commanded. "We'll be at the ferry in a sec."

Rostik climbed up onto the passenger seat. Ivan sat in the saddle and pressed the pedals. The engine did not start. This did not in the least put him out.

"Get off. We'll drive downhill—it'll start all right downhill."

Ivan led the moped by the red handlebar almost at a run. Rostik followed him, casting a last forlorn glance at the dogs' tracks in the road. Were they Kesha's? Or not? Perhaps he should have waited for Kesha on the bench? Perhaps Kesha had come looking for him?

Ivan took the moped onto the road which ran downhill to join the big road along which Rostik and Kesha had come to the village from the riverbank. There was the familiar poplar, and the clump of elder bushes. The ferry landing was hidden behind a turn in the road, but they could see the opposite bank with some pine-trees growing on it and a flock of white ducks swimming in the river and somebody's boat tied to the bank.

"How far one can see from here," Rostik thought.

The sun had again peeped out of the clouds. A small shiny airplane was slowly crawling across the sky, so high one could not hear it at all. A lark started singing. Rostik looked for it in the sky but could not see it. Silvery wormwood was growing by the roadside. Rostik plucked a leaf, rubbed it between his fingers and then smelled his fingers. That was what his mother always did.

"The road doesn't seem too steep," said Ivan. "And there's nothing to laugh at! I saw a Moskvich car pushed down it, and then its engine caught on. And this is just a moped!" He twisted some knob by the handlebars, tapped at the blue splash boards and tried the spokes and the tires. He was obviously imitating his elder brother, the owner of the smart moped.

"Climb on, Rostislav!"

Again Rostik climbed into the passenger seat. Ivan began pressing the pedals, leaning now on this side, now on the other—his legs were not yet long enough. The moped started rolling like an ordinary bicycle. The engine was silent. But as they went downhill, the moped gradually gathered speed and soon was racing along fully out of Ivan's control. Ivan clutched at the handles so hard his fingers grew blue. Rostik's tongue jerked disgustingly in his mouth. Some pebbles were bouncing up from the road and hitting Rostik's legs and also the spokes, which squeaked raspingly.

Ivan was staring fixedly at the road, which threw itself under his wheels. The moped did not obey him at all and refused to go where Ivan was trying to steer it. Suddenly it swerved off the road, leapt up three times on hillocks and fell on its side. The handlebars were knocked awry, and the front wheel became bent out of shape. Rostik had fallen on his side. He had not had far to fall from the backseat, and was not really hurt. Ivan had dived over the handlebars and had suffered more damage. He had a bruise on his chin, he had grazed his elbows and had a nasty bump on the knee. But he was much more put out by the sight of the smashed moped. He lifted it, then lowered it down again and tried unbending the front wheel, but it refused to be unbent. They became aware of somebody going down the road. Ivan looked round and panicked.

"Militia!" he cried to Rostik. "Let's hide!"

He pulled Rostik right into the thick of the clump of elders. There was no grass on the ground, the earth had been worked loose by worms and it smelled of some medicine and toadstools. The graze on Rostik's leg smarted and there was a dull pain in his left elbow.

As earlier, on the landing stage, he had a feeling he was falling ill.

Chapter Eight

THE ALARM SPREADS

"Well, Maria Vassilievna?"

"They say some Lieutenant Groshev is looking for him. They say there haven't been any accidents and that we shouldn't worry."

"Oh God! Let us call the mill."
"I suppose we'd better."
"You make the call, Maria Vassilievna."
"No, you call, Elizaveta Elizarovna, and I shall go to the children. Dussia has been looking after them, but I must let her go and cook supper."

* * *

"That's a fine bear you've modelled, Sasha!"
"It's not a bear, it's a dog."
"Yes, a fine dog."
"I have a dog too, Maria Vassilievna!"
"Yes, it's nice too. Why are you doing nothing, Pavlik?"
"I am not doing nothing."
"But you're not modelling!"
"No."
"Are you throwing a tantrum, Pavlik?"
"No, I am not. I am waiting for Rostik."
"Goodness me!"

* * *

"Miss, listen, miss, I asked you to put me through to the linen mill. What d'you mean they don't answer? If the shop doesn't answer, connect me with the trade union committee. I gave you two numbers, didn't I?"

* * *

"Well, have you talked to them?"
"No, there is no connection. I'll dial exchange again."
"Let me do it."
"Do, Maria Vassilievna."

* * *

"Exchange! Hullo! What about my call to the linen mill? I'm waiting. Hullo! Hullo! Who is speaking? Comrade Kharitonova? This is Maria Vassilievna speaking! From the kindergarten!"

"Why, has anything happened, Maria Vassilievna?"

"Only don't get upset, please!"

"What's the matter! What has happened to Rostik?"

"He had a cough and we placed him in the isolation ward..."

"Is he ill?"

"He has walked out."

"How d'you mean? Where did he go? I don't understand."

"I left him alone for a short while. Then I brought him dinner..."

"Has he been missing since dinner time?"

"Yes."

"Oh God, you have a river there, haven't you?"

"No, nothing like that could have happened. We called the militia station."

"Why the militia? I'll come at once. Hullo! Can you hear me? I'll take a taxi and come immediately. Where can he be, goodness me! I'm coming!"

"She's coming."

"Maria Vassilievna, I'll go to the river bank."

"Very well, only take something, you look like the death, Elizaveta Elizarovna."

Chapter Nine

KHARITONOV IS ME

Sometimes you walk and walk and it means nothing, and sometimes you take one single step and something very important happens. Lieutenant Groshev and Kesha walked through several streets to no purpose at all, but in this street Kesha became suddenly excited. Why, it was Gleb's street! There was the hill of sand somebody had unloaded recently by a fence, there was the old hollow willow-tree that seemed forever sighing, and there was Gleb's gate!

"Why, Kesha, what's wrong?"

"Here!" Kesha shouted, "Gleb lives here!"

Lieutenant Groshev went up to the gate. On the other side of the fence stood a dense wall of yellow acacias. Two voices were talking behind that wall, but he couldn't see the talkers.

"Each brings up his children as he sees fit," a disgruntled voice was speaking. "We don't need no beasts about the place."

"You're wrong, Dmitry Glebych," another voice argued. "An animal is weaker than man, for it has not got reason and speech. So it needs care and protection. And care is good for the one who does the caring. It makes him feel for others. Those children who pity living creatures grow up to be kind to people too."

"I told you. I won't have any dogs about my place," the disgruntled voice interrupted. "I have strawberries growing in the garden. And I like to keep my house clean."

Lieutenant Groshev pushed the gate open. There was a bell attached to it, which tinkled when the gate opened.

Dmitry Glebovich, Gleb's grandfather, stood in the narrow garden path.

"We did not call the militia," he said to Lieutenant Groshev. "You want house seven, and ours is nine."

"Why should I want house seven?" Lieutenant Groshev asked in surprise. "I don't want house seven at all. I want Gleb."

"Gleb? What has he been up to? He never went outside the gate yesterday."

"Where is he?"

"He's not here. He got ill and they took him away."

"Where?"

"To the airport," Dmitry Glebovich said in an annoyed tone of voice. "Silly tricks!"

"What tricks?"

"To treat illness in this stupid way. All right, the boy has a whooping cough. What he needs is warm milk with honey. And they prescribe an airplane. The cough will pass if he flies up in the air, if you please! Silly tricks I call it and a lot of unnecessary expense."

"Hello, boy," Grandpa Koldyr greeted Lieutenant Groshev, emerging from behind an acacia bush. "Well, Dmitry Glebych, goodbye if that's how it is."

He stepped off the narrow path to walk round Gleb's grandfather and walked out through the gate together with Lieutenant Groshev, who made Dmitry Glebych a parting salute. The bell tinkled again.

Kesha ran up to them, interrupting another of his nervous doggy yawns.

"Oh, here you are, dog!" Grandpa Koldyr exclaimed in surprise. "And the little chicken has been searching for you high and low."

"Everybody seems to be looking for everybody else here," Groshev said with a wry smile. "I am on the lookout for yet another 'chicken', Foma Nikitich. I think I'll go down to the landing stage."

Lieutenant Groshev and Grandpa Koldyr walked side by side, the old man limping a little. Kesha kept at their heels.

"Who's that chicken you mentioned?"

"The one who ran away from kindergarten on account of a dog."

"Who is he? From what kindergarten? What's his name?"

"I did not ask him his name. From the linen mill kindergarten. Why, are they looking for him?"

"They certainly are looking for one of their kids, but I don't know if it's the same one. It looks as though two are on the lam."

"Well, I sent this one back home with Ivan. They must be on the ferry now."

"I see. I suppose I'd better get across and inquire."

They had now emerged on the road that led to the ferry. A clump of elder bushes came in sight. There was nobody in the road, but Kesha pricked up his ears. He stopped in his tracks and began sniffing the air, moving his head from side to side.

A whiff of wind from the clump of elders brought the familiar smell. Kesha raced for the elders.

"Rostik! Rostik!"

Suddenly Grandpa Koldyr stumbled against the moped's twisted wheel and almost fell. Lieutenant Groshev stretched out his hand to steady him, and at that moment Rostik crawled out of the elder bushes looking frightened, while Ivan made a dash into the opposite direction, away from the road.

"Ivan, stop this minute, you stupid mackerel!" Granddad Koldyr shouted in a very cross voice.

"Aha," said Lieutenant Groshev, "what do we have here? The landing site of a Martian spaceship?" And he pointed to the smashed moped.

"There is very little air on Mars," Ivan said glumly. "Not enough for human beings."

"Is that so? Then perhaps it's a moped that somebody took without permission and smashed to smithereens?"

"Why didn't you go back to your kindergarten?" Granddad Koldyr asked Rostik.

"And who will you be?" Lieutenant Groshev asked at the same time.

"I'm Rostik."

"And who's Kharitonov then? Is he with you?"

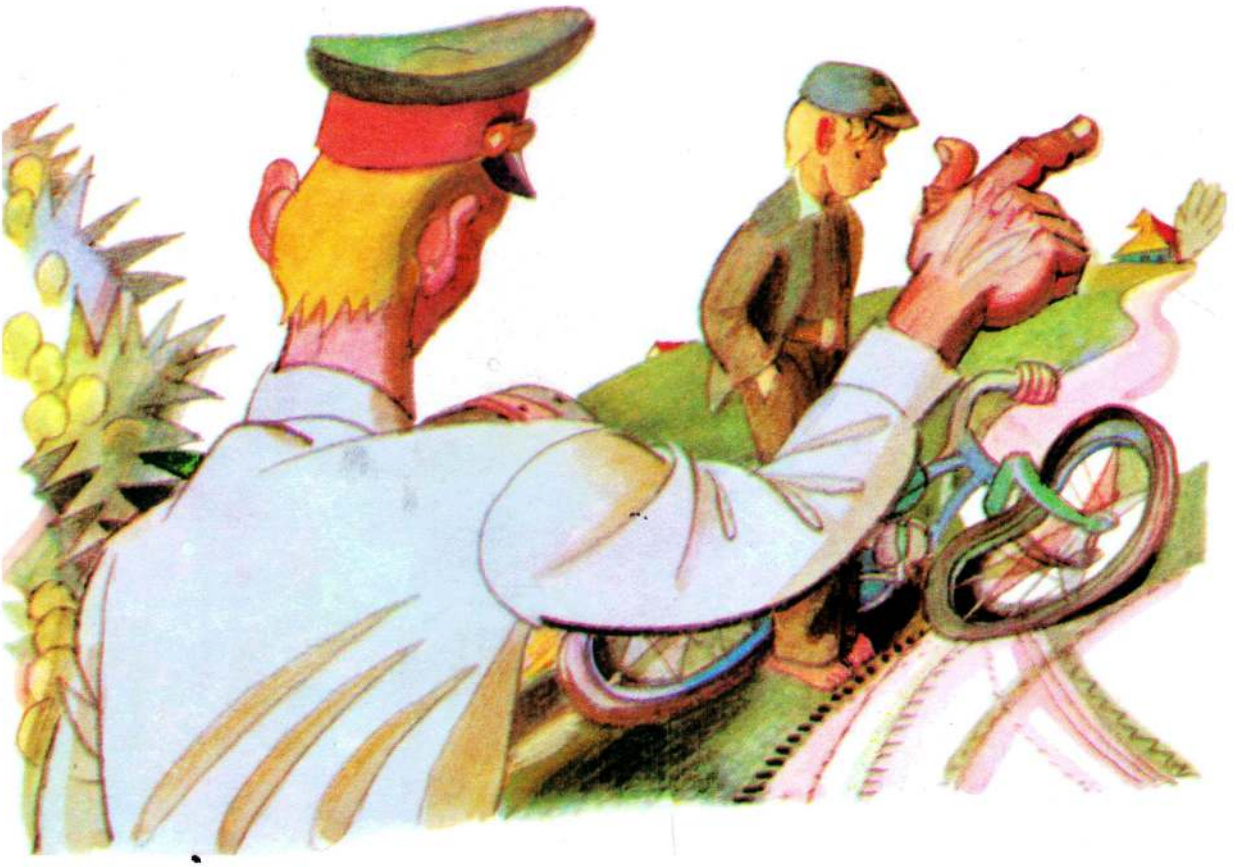
"Kharitonov is me," Rostik whispered.

"You?"

Lieutenant Groshev burst out laughing.

"'Caustic'! So it's Rostik and not 'caustic'—I ought to have guessed! Well, we're beginning to see light. Instead of two kids lost we only have one, and we've found him."

He laughed happily, then said to Ivan in a stern voice:



"And you drag your moped home and receive the thanks that are due you. And tomorrow report at the militia station without fail."

"What for? It's no crime to take your own brother's moped. It's Fedka's moped."

"So I gathered."

"What have I done then? I was taking him to the kindergarten, it's not my fault that the centre of gravity shifted."

"I'll discuss these matters with you tomorrow, Professor."

Ivan lifted the moped sulkily and without saying goodbye to anybody or even looking at anybody, started pushing the unwilling moped up the road. A little neat wagtail who was walking across the road at the moment flew aside, and then walked on, wagging its tail disapprovingly.

"Well, my boy, I think I'll go now," Grandpa Koldyr said to Lieutenant Groshev. "We'll be distilling tomorrow, I must make ready."

"Yes, of course, Foma Nikitich. I'll take him home in a launch."

Kesha looked at Rostik, then at Lieutenant Groshev.

"And what's going to happen to me?" his eyes seemed to be asking.

Chapter Ten

EACH DOG MUST HAVE A MASTER

Elizaveta Elizarovna was peering at the road which led across the meadow to the river. And Rostik's mother was walking back and forth from the crooked pine to the tree-stump and back. Elizaveta Elizarovna was holding her cheek as though she had just had a tooth pulled out.

Maria Vassilievna came running along the path.

"They've found him! I've just had a call! He'll be here soon."

All the three of them ran down across the meadow to the river—as though playing tag, and trying to outrace one another. But only wind itself could have outraced Rostik's mother—she just flew along.

There was the riverbank. A militia launch was speeding across, and from inside it somebody was shouting words they could not make out. Now they could see that beside Rostik and a militiaman there was a dog in the launch.

"They used a dog to track him down," thought Maria Vassilievna. "Wait till I get my hands on you!"

"Thank god they've found him! But what is that dog doing in the launch?" thought Elizaveta Elizarovna.

"My little boy, he's safe and sound, what joy!" thought Rostik's mother, without noticing either the militiaman or the dog.

The engine was switched off. The launch half crowled up the low grassy bank. The waves and the wet sand greeted Rostik: the sand rustled and the waves seemed to clap their hands as they splashed against the bank.

The first to step out of the boat was the smiling Lieutenant Groshev, then Kesha jumped out, his tail still coiled, but a little drooping too. The last to get out, holding onto Lieutenant Groshev's hand was Rostik. For a few seconds he stood on the wet sand, his sandals getting wet too, then he made a dash for Mummy

breaking into terrific bawling—loud, disconsolate and altogether quite babyish. Mummy picked him up into her arms, like a baby and they all walked to the kindergarten. And the pines parted a little to let them all walk side by side. Mummy was carrying the heavy Rostik, who had stopped crying and was only giving a little sob now and then, and Lieutenant Groshev was telling them the story of Rostik's adventures, while Kesha trudged beside him, his nose almost down to the ground.

* * *

Elizaveta Elizarovna and Maria Vassilievna had gone to the children after giving Rostik a proper dressing-up. And why not? They had all but gone out of their minds with worry. But after calming down, they had forgiven him. After all they were two very kind-hearted women.

Elizaveta Elizarovna had asked him in parting:

"Are you sure you haven't been coughing at all? Then it definitely is not pertussis."

Now Rostik was sitting on Mummy's left knee, while Kesha was leaning against her right knee, and Mummy kept stroking him with her right hand.

"Perhaps it's all my fault," she was saying to Lieutenant Groshev. "I hate hard-hearted people. And I taught him to help those who are weaker. I read books about such people to him, and when we went for walks... It's my own fault, indeed. And now he ran off and caused all this worry to people."

Mummy sighed and stroked both Rostik and Kesha with her two hands.

"Your son had a hard choice to make," Lieutenant Groshev said. And he added after a pause, "Every dog must have a master."

"Yes, of course," Mummy agreed readily. "And what is now going to happen to this nice dog?"

Kesha pricked up his ears and looked at them all in turn.

"I have four of them," said Lieutenant Groshev, looking embarrassed for some reason. "I simply don't know. What shall we do, Kesha?"

Kesha wagged his tail, blinked and said nothing. Gleb was gone. What could Kesha suggest?

"Too bad I have to go to work every day," Mummy said. Rostik had no idea what she was talking about. "And our apartment is small. On the other hand," Mummy said brightly, "my son is growing up, and he will help me. And they promised to give me a good apartment soon. If they promised, they will give it, won't they?" she said to Rostik.

And Rostik screamed with joy and began hugging Mummy. And Kesha kept jumping up in order to lick Mummy on the tip of her nose, and Lieutenant Groshev smiled happily and kept saying "Thank you" for some reason.

* * *

So Mummy went back to town leading Kesha on a piece of string—for where could she get a collar and a proper lead for their dog out of the blue?

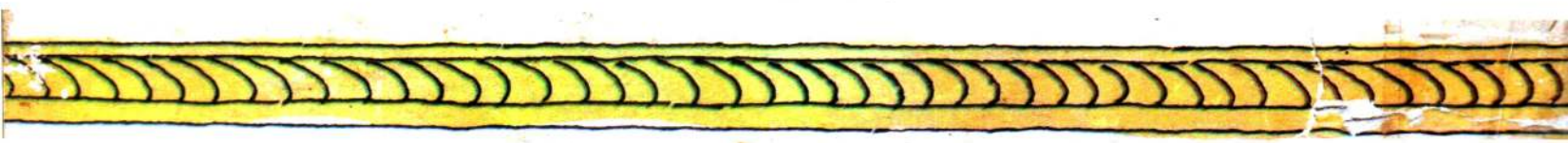
And Rostik fell asleep—not in the isolation ward but in his own bed that stood next to Pavlik's.

And the hazel bush dozed off, and the moon sailed out and lit up the birch-tree. The birch stood very beautiful and very silent—because everybody was asleep and it had nobody to talk to till the morning.

И. Токмакова

РОСТИК И КЕША

На английском языке



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